

Water Safety In Open Water

We are all familiar with water safety programmes that focus on the beach or swimming pools. However, many water accidents and drownings occur on inland waters.

The recent death on the Yarra River near Warrandyte is a clear example of the lack of respect and understanding that most of us have of moving water. When a couple of novice canoeists became entangled in the high Yarra water and were swept into the tunnel at pound bend, a shiver ran through our bodies as we know it could have been any one of us or our children. It is too easy to under-estimate the force of water and the lack of control we have when we are caught in a current.

A group of paddling enthusiasts and swimming teachers have formed an innovative water safety programme for children that focuses on both inland waters and the sea. Aqua Skills, appropriately named, teaches children about the dangers in rivers, waterways, lakes and dams and how to manage their rescue if they do get into trouble.

The course looks at hazards such as currents, rapids, strainers, tunnels and drains, and dangers that may be hidden on the bank or under the water. The course covers essential safety equipment and how to use it properly.

Tim Sillcock, the CEO of Aqua Skills, explains that children need to learn to feel undressed when they are not wearing the proper safety equipment when participating in water based activities. "It's like wearing your seat belt," says Tim. "You automatically reach for it when you get into the car. Likewise, children need to reach for their safety gear whenever they go near water. It should be a habit that stays with them throughout their life!"

Aqua Skills also teaches children how to identify hazards around inland waters. Rob Cooling from ROAM Adventures, a licensed Aqua Skills trainer, likens water awareness training to road safety training for children in which reinforcement is an ongoing process. "We want children to stop and look around the

water environment before they plunge into an activity. Aqua Skills teaches them what to look for so any potential dangers are managed."

Aqua Skills encourages enjoyment with water based activities. The delivery of the programme is designed to be lots of fun. Children learn better in a positive environment.

With public liability insurance companies demanding tighter safety control of outdoor activities, an Aqua Skills course is essential pre-training for water based programmes. Those schools that are already training students in Aqua Skills see it as an integral component to their water based programmes. Naturally, safety briefings are delivered at the beginning of any water based activity. This serves to reinforce the drills that are practised in the Aqua Skills programme.

Safety standards have traditionally focused on instructor training and ratios, equipment quality, systems and reporting. Recent review of the legal responsibility of adventure programme providers has highlighted the need to brief and train customers in safety prior to an activity. Participants must be well informed of potential dangers and can assist with risk reduction by self-managing their safety. The need for safety training for children is even greater as their life experience and general safety awareness is lower than adults.

Aqua Skills is a non-profit programme that is licensed to appropriately qualified adventure and recreation organisations to run. The beach component is run with the assistance of Surf Life Saving Victoria.

Aqua Skills can be contacted by phoning 03 98191300 or ROAM Adventures on 1300 65 22 77, email info@aquaskills.com.au or via the Aqua Skills website, www.aquaskills.com.au.